

By Wolf Schneider

# Lee Lyon

AN INNOVATOR IN CAST GLASS

**I**t's hot and loud in the forge where Lee Lyon formulates his exquisite cast-glass tables, furniture, and windows. Machines grind and churn and everyone shouts to be heard. At the center of all this artistic commotion a furnace roars. The furnace is so hot—2,340 degrees Fahrenheit—it transforms the solid glass into an orange liquid that's scooped up in steel ladles, then poured into sand-and-resin molds. The 81-year-old Lyon and his partner, 38-year-old Jacqueline Spiro, assisted by team members Dylan and Pedro today, use torches, paddles, and buckets of water to perform their alchemy, deftly darting about to avoid getting burned. Glass shards fly.

Lyon headed out from his home in Aspen, Colorado, early this morning in his red pickup despite a snowstorm. Winter snowfalls don't deter him from driving a half-hour downvalley to Carbondale at 8 a.m. to don a welder's visor, aluminum-foil coat, and insulated gloves for the weekly glass pours that are the basis of his livelihood. When he reinvented himself in midlife with a move to Aspen, he wanted an artist's life and he got it.

Over the almost 30 years he's been here, he's been president of the Anderson Ranch art collective and knows everybody in town. And they know him. His low-profile fame is such that you might as well call him Mr. Aspen.

Lyon's cast-glass coffee tables, shown at Sardella Fine Art in downtown Aspen alongside similarly luscious glassworks by his mentor, Dale Chihuly, are initially what got me interested enough to track down their creator. On the early morning drive with him through the snowstorm today, I find out Lyon was raised in Kansas City, Missouri, then attended Harvard. "At that time, it was easier to get into from the Midwest because they had so many Easterners; with my smarts and high-school

record, no way could I go to Harvard *today*," he confesses. After college, he enlisted in the Air Force for World War II, returning to Kansas City to join his family's fur and cattle-hide garment business.

The move to Aspen came in 1978, when Lyon and his wife were able to buy a condominium from a developer-builder friend for a reasonable price (eventual appreciation of the property allowed the couple to upgrade to a hillside house). His wife opened the Joanne Lyon Gallery, for which Lyon did the crating and shipping while pursuing a career as a clay artist. By representing such popular Western artists as Fritz Scholder, Yazzie Johnson, Gail Bird, and Dale Chihuly, as well as contemporary icon Andy Warhol, the gallery boomed. Customers included Jack Nicholson, who, Lyon says, "would come into the gallery in his white coveralls.... He collected the Hudson River School painters."

Another client was Australian-born media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who in 1991 commissioned Lyon—then working as a ceramist under the moniker of MC Fire—to fabricate a colorful wall installation at his house in Beverly Hills. When Murdoch wanted yet more color, Lyon remembers,

"I'd been messing around with broken windshield glass. So I fired oxides into these tiles and spread broken windshield glass in them, and I got bright greens and browns, but I couldn't get reds and yellows."

Seeking the elusive colors is how Lyon—at the time in his late 60s—got serious about glass art. He joined the Studio Glass movement, attending Chihuly's legendary Pilchuck Glass School in Washington state (he has since gone back as a teacher), then bought a furnace. "Unlike clay, you cannot do glass alone," Lyon says. "So I put the word out and Jacqueline called." They clicked as business partners: "She was hired to be the muscle



Japanese window, 30 x 32



Cast-glass front door with Apache design, 96 x 72



Cast-glass front doors at a Woody Creek, Colorado, residence, 96 x 50

and to do her own thing, her own designs. Eventually we did profit-sharing, and then partners, and now she owns the whole business and I'm the cheap help."

He's kidding, of course. But what they do is serious stuff. "We cast glass into resin-bonded sand. It hardens up, and then we work it with diamond tools," Lyon says. "It's not blown glass, like Dale Chihuly and William Morris do. This is hot-cast glass. We may use some blown-glass elements, but the hot-cast glass is thicker, and it's ideally suited for doors or windows. It's an inch or more thick." Their particular procedure is unique to them: "If there's anyone else doing what we're doing, I don't know about it. It's a bronze-working technique." Most of their art is architectural-glass commissions running from \$5,000 to \$30,000 each, although some installations have gone for as much as \$200,000.

In the forge today, hot glass is being poured into molds. The molds are shoved into an annealing oven, where they'll remain for 10 days to cool down slowly from a high of about 910 degrees Fahrenheit. The machines are hissing and clanging as the collaborators interact. They look like Planet Glass extraterrestrials, all goggles and visors, bandannas tying back their hair, bodies bulky in firemen's garb. "Ready?" Dylan



yells, scooping a shovelful of hot glass out of a metal cauldron. He pours it into a mold. Lyon darts behind him to sprinkle in colored glass powder, then snip off the leftover hot glass hanging off the ladle. It falls to the floor in a stream of shining orange liquid that quickly hardens into chips.

"Art glass is a contemporary movement," Lyon explains later, "but the design work can be anything—Aztec imagery, Apache imagery, Roman gods, tribal art." His strong suit, he says, is "innovative design and innovative process methods."

After a day at the forge, Mr. Aspen heads back to his home in the wooded mountainside community of Maroon Creek Valley. Confidently steering his red pickup up the icy driveway, Lyon confides something about his MO. "I don't do fancy sketches," he says. "I lie in bed at night and design tables in my head, and jump up and make a quick sketch."

He'll be settling in to bed soon—to sleep, perchance to dream and to design, pursuing the pyrotechnics of glass, melding art and science in a fusion of sparks, flames, and beauty.

*Lee Lyon's work can be seen at Sardella Fine Art in Aspen, Colorado, and Spiro Lyon Glass in Carbondale, Colorado. Visit [www.spirolyonglass.com](http://www.spirolyonglass.com).*